DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 091 CS 505 526

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TITLE Identifying Critical Issue Speech Topics Utilizing the Nominal Group Technique.
PUB DATE May 87
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (78th, Syracuse, NY, May 18-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Controversial Issues (Course Content); Critical Thinking; *Current Events; Group Discussion; Higher Education; Persuasive Discourse; *Public Speaking; Rhetorical Invention; *Speech Communication; *Speech Curriculum; *Teaching Methods; World Problems
IDENTIFIERS Nominal Group Technique; *Topic Selection

ABSTRACT

To illustrate the incorporation of liberal arts values into the speech communication curriculum, this paper presents a rationale for creating a public speaking course that emphasizes the analysis of current critical issues. The paper argues that by requiring students to speak on important issues, rather than on personal topics, they will need to research historic and contemporary perspectives on their topic. It also contends that students will be more likely to use the methods for speech preparation as they have been taught by their teachers and textbooks. Further, the paper asserts that students will benefit from the opportunity to delve deeply into one particular topic and give each assigned speech on that same topic, while pointing out that by assigning critical topics, teachers will be able to grade both the content and delivery of student speeches. The paper then describes a nominal group process exercise for determining issues that students perceive to be of current importance, and provides a sample list of those issues. Finally, the paper discusses the use of the nominal grouping technique in other types of speech courses, such as business and professional speaking. (SRT)

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IDENTIFYING CRITICAL ISSUE SPEECH TOPICS UTILIZING THE NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE (*)

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(*) This paper is a revision of a manuscript, "A Critical Issues Approach in Public Speaking Instruction," used for instructional purposes during a Short Course in the Speech Communication Association Annual Convention, Chicago, November 13, 1986.

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There are many popular approaches to the teaching of the undergraduate public speaking course, including the teaching of basic rhetorical skills from the liberal arts tradition, or teaching speaking in public as a valued service course in any a number of career oriented academic programs. Until recently the basic public speaking course at Youngstown State University shared with the business and professional speaking course, a more career oriented perspective rather than the liberal arts purview. However, within the last year, the goals of the public speaking course have been redefined to more closely reflect the values of course content associated with the liberal arts tradition. This goal was accomplished by emphasizing speech-making on topics of current significance to the nation and the world at large. It is our purpose in this paper, to share our rationale for putting together a public speaking course which emphasizes the analysis of and speaking on critical issues of our day and to suggest some strategies found to be successful in presenting this perspective to students and preparing them to use it.

The idea of selecting critical issues for students to speak on as they learned to acquire rhetorical competence, belongs to Isocrates, the Greek rhetorician who was a contemporary of the most famous of classical Greek rhetorical theoreticians, Aristotle [1]. To Isocrates belongs the distinction of founding what is acknowledged as the most

successful school of rhetoric known to the Hellenic world. Cicero said that Isocrates' school was the one in which the eloquence of all Greece was trained and perfected, mentioning some forty distinguished pupils to support his claim [2]. Students from all over the western world were attracted to this great teacher who required above all else that his students be well versed in speaking to the public issues of the day [3]. Isocrates, as a teacher of speech-making, insisted that his students use broad, noble themes, "discourses not for petty disputes, but which deal with affairs of State, and are appropriate to be delivered at the Pan-Hellenic assemblies . . . " [4]. He wrote that when

> . . . anyone elects to speak or write discourses which are worthy of praise and honour, it is not conceivable that he will support causes which are unjust or petty or devoted to private quarrels, and not rather those which are great and honourable, devoted to the welfare of man and our common good . . . [5].

We have selected not to reinvent Isocrates' approach to speech training, but to capture its essence for utility in the twentieth century. In addition, twenty five hundred years of speech education and development of other useful devices have influenced our approach in the public speaking course.

Re-establishing a Critical Issues Approach

The argument for re-establishing the critical issues approach for contemporary students enrolled in public speaking courses was advanced by rhetorical scholars Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird in their book Speech Criticism [6]. In the concluding chapter of their work, entitled "Toward a Philosophy of Rhetoric," they suggest the validity and worthiness of a return to Isocrates' notion of a close union between politics and rhetoric. Their specific line of argument is as follows:

> The practical uses of rhetorical to which Aristotle referred are even more applicable to society today than they were to the Greece of his time. True, the complexity of modern society makes it more difficult for every man to participate directly in the deliberations of assemblies in the administration of justice. Many of these duties have been delegated to men of professional rank in these callings. But every citizen still needs -- in fact, needs more imperatively today -- a familiarity with rhetoric, to the end that he may avail himself of its advantages in the true Aristotelian sense: (1) of perceiving the difference between truth and error; (2) of understanding how

> people are moved to action, despite the absence of compelling argument; (3) of arguing both sides of a question in order to determine the truth; and (4) of being able to defend himself with speech [7].

Based on the need to deal with issues of present import to our society, Thonssen and Baird conclude their argument by stating:

> The revival of certain features of the Isocratean doctrine is overdue. While holding to a defense of practical knowledge, Isocrates insisted that the individual strive for good conduct -- that he be a citizen whose ethical principles shone through his actions. The citizen was to be a cultivated speaker, 'for the power to speak well i taken as the surest index of a sound understanding, and discourse which is true and lawful and just is the outward image of a good and faithful soul.'
>
> In Isocrates' theory of culture, there was no room for discourses on petty and unjust causes. Instead, the themes were to be grand in their scope and nature, honorable in their motives, and 'devoted to the welfare of

> man and our common good . . . . ' The Speakers were to embrace subjects of broad, almost universal character. Thus oratory and disciplined statesmanship were linked in common bond [8].

As further support of Thonssen and Baird's claim that we return to analysis of critical social issues as subject matter as we teach the "art of speaking well," we should add that we perceive improved content and style of student speeches when this approach is adopted. Isocrates was absolutely correct in observing that private quarrels, petty topics, and parochial interests do not lend themselves to the teaching of eloquent discourse.

Selecting Critical Issues for Speech-Making

Our approach at Youngstown State University is to do a modified Nominal Group Process Exercise which delineates those issues which students perceive to be of current importance in the world around them [9]. Customarily during the first week of classes we explain that all speaking in class will be done on critical issues and we ask that students create a list of potential critical issues topics, using the customary steps involved in a Nominal Group Techniques activity, i.e.: Step 1: Silent generation of ideas in writing; Step 2: Round-robin recording of ideas; Step 3: Serial discussion for

clarification; Step 4: Preliminary vote on item importance; Step 5: Discussion of the preliminary vote [10]. After students have rated their choices, a typical class list of issues will be similar to the following:

Critical Issues in the World Today

	TOPICS	RANKINGS
1.	World Power	2,1,3,1,1
2.	Farm Problem (finances)	2
3.	State of Family	
4.	Budget	2
5.	Drugs	3,3,3,3
6.	Toxic Waste	2,3,3,3
7.	Natural Disasters/Warnings	
8.	Economics of Education	
9.	Drugs in Sports	2,2
10.	Nutrition	1,1,1
11.	The Poor	2,2,2,3,2,3,1
12.	Child Abuse	3,3,2,2
13.	Women's Rights	
14.	Insurance Crisis	
15.	Terrorism	2,1,1,2,3,1,1,3,1,1
16.	Apartheid	
17.	Legal Drinking Age	

The list is then xeroxed so that each student may have a copy to be used to select a topic area for speaking by the end of the first week of classes. Students must prepare and deliver all their speeches on the same general topic throughout the course, and are not permitted to choose any topic not on the NGT list [11].

Advantages to Teaching a Critical Issues Approach

This approach to pedagogy in the public speaking course offers specific advantages. First, students are thinking and preparing messages on issues of importance in contemporary society, thus enhancing their ability to assess issues in future situations within their careers or personal relationships. This contemporary issue approach focuses the student-speaker's thinking and analysis. Historically, as evidenced by many of the topics which students selected for discussion, there has been little need for students to conduct extensive research on selected topics prior to delivering a speech. For example, student speeches seemingly rotated around topics with little significance to their particular audience (i.e., "My Pet Hamster," "Belonging to 4H," or "My Favorite Department Store," etc.). Seemingly, topics were selected because of their convenience and/or prior knowledge. Little, if any, attention was given by the typical student to the nature of the audience for thge speech, despite instructors'

explanations and pleadings that the needs and knowledge of the audience should be of paramount concern in topic selection and idea development. As a result of this topic-selection-by-convenience, students conducted little, if any, research on topics. The critical issue approach will promotes the need for students to research historic and contemporary perspectives on their topic, whether from the bibliographies which may be presented to them or on their own initiative.

A second advantage of using the critical issues approach is that the speaker faces a relatively educated audience when delivering the message. Traditionally, student-listeners have been poor audiences in the classroom because of their lack of knowledge of particular topics. Given the narrow focus of created by the identification of general issues for the class, chances are increased that one or several other students will select the same topic and will become well-versed on the subject area. This fact suggests to the students that they should prepare their speeches the way they were taught in their textbooks and by their instructor. Few, if any teachers of public speaking can assert that the methodology they provide students for speech preparation is followed with any degree of certainty. Our suspicion is that these methodologies are listened to, written in a notebook, and remembered only for examinations. Perhaps, once students realize they will not be the only person knowledgeable on a topic, they might give

the methodologies suggested for speech preparation more than a cursory review. They might actually decide to use them during the speech preparation processes and delivery.

The selection of critical issues by the class offers a third benefit, in that it permits a student to delve deeply into a topic and give each assigned speech on that topic. This provides the student opportunity to work within that general topic to discover new ways of presenting information, new approaches to topics already discussed, and/or develop innovative solutions to problems related to that topic. This process will illustrate to the student-speaker that each issue faced has multi-faceted dimensions. Each source investigated opens the door to several other sources of information each with potential utility. The availability of information on any given topic illustrates to the student the importance of selection of sources and information currently not operationalized by them. Frequently, when facing the speaking situation, the student experiences the all-too-common problem of insufficient time to research a topic thoroughly because of constraints imposed by classroom organization. In the critical issues approach, a student will pursue only one topic in the term, assuring ample time to investigate a topic to the level necessary for course expectations.

Finally, the critical issues approach gives speech teachers opportunity to move from the safe position of being a

delivery-oriented instructors. Since students have opportunity to pursue a topic in detail, the instructor can expect that there will be a serious attempt to prepare strong content for each speech. Being able to locate the necessary balance between the content of a message and its delivery, stresses the two canons of rhetoric usually not balanced within the public speaking class. It is easy for the student and instructor to rely heavily on the delivery of a message, in preparation and evaluation. Given the apparent lack of time for speech preparation currently available to the student, the instructor can rationalize giving the student the benefit of the doubt when a message is delivered well. The critical issues approach enables us to offer a response to the question posed every speech teacher: **Which is more important, good content delivered poorly or poor content delivered well?**

Speech Topic Selection

One of the issues faced by the instructor and student in the public speaking course is how topics for speeches are selected. Should the instructor assign topics to students? Should students have freedom of choice in selecting any topic? Should the instructor and student negotiate the topic for each speech assignment? Typically, an instructor will dictate the type of assignment to be given and not the specific speech topic. For example, it is common for the instructor to

make a persuasive or informative speaking assignment and then spend some class time explaining idiosyncratic requirements for that assignment.

This approach places the students in a quandary. Specifically, how will the individual student interpret the teacher's message and decide on a specific topic for the presentation? What criteria will the student use to determine if the topic is worthy of the time involved in developing and delivering a speech? Typically, in spite of lectures on being sensitive to the knowledge, needs, and interests of the audience, the student will select a topic that he or she is interested in and show little if any regard for the student-listener to be faced later. To solve this quandary, for several quarters we collected lists of speech topics from instructors in the basic public speaking course [12].

Student-selected topics are generally too broad or overly simplistic to execute a quality speech of any length. Topics selected through the use of the Nominal Group in the public speaking course appear more meaningful with multi-faceted dimensions. These topics included:

The National Debt

Help for Farmers

Foreign Trade Policy

Interest Rates

Government Spending

Military Spending

Cost and Availability of Energy

World Hunger

Inflation

Unemployment

Technological Systems

Aid to College Students

The Decay of the Industrial Base

Taxes

Welfare and Its Requirements

Hopefully, the reader gains the sense of difference in tone and type of topics selected given the two different listings of speech topics. In the initial list, students were given total freedom of choice in selecting topics. In the second list, students engaged the Nominal Group Technique to determine the more salient topics of the day for use in class assignments. These topics served as the range available to the student preparing for all specific speaking assignments. Speeches, both persuasive and informative, were then developed using one of these topics throughout the term. Students were permitted to select her or his topic area, but once selected, had to prepare all speeches on that topic for the remainder of the term.

Other Applications of NGT

In addition to the above-mentioned advantages for the public speaking course, we have discovered several other potential applications of the Nominal Grouping Technique and the critical issues approach in other types of speech performance courses. For example, in the business and professional speaking course and the speech skills in the classroom course, students were able to identify some of the most important issues facing business and industry and education in the respective classes.

For example, here is a list of ten contemporary issues selected by the students in the speech communication skills in the classroom course [13]:

Motivating Students

Teacher Competence

Classroom Discipline

Drug & Alcohol Abuse

Athletics vs. Academics

Teacher Involvement

Extra Curricular Activities

Parental-Teachers Relations

Sex Education

Public School Funding

Students were instructed to develop one persuasive and one

informative speech on a single topic during the term, using the same topic for both speeches.

Students in the business and professional speaking course [14] were given the same instructions following the completion of the Nominal Group in their class. The topics resulting from the Nominal Group Technique were:

Management-Labor Relations

Motivation in the Workplace

Communication on the Job

Changing Careers

An Industrial Society vs. A Service Society

Job Sharing

Salaries and Benefits

Foreign Competition

Job Training

Harassment & Job Discrimination

Job Security.

From this listing, students were to give one persuasive and one informative speech on the same topic.

Students using this technique were able to apply the speech preparation materials provided them in their textbooks and classroom discussion to speaking situations faced in the classroom. To enhance the need to adapt messages to listeners and to increase the audience's knowledge level, each student was given a corporate history from which much of the background data for speeches were selected [15].

The approach is also helpful in a hybrid communication course where there is a tendency to rely on the public speaking assignment by the instructor for evaluation purposes [16]. The critical issues approach has been demonstrated to be helpful in selecting meaningful topics in four different communication performance courses to date: public speaking, business and professional speaking, speech communication skills in the classroom, and the hybrid communication course. Other potential applications are possible in additional communication courses. This approach develops student participation and student ego-involvement in the class assignments. Instructors willing to accept student-directed topic selection in any oral performance course would find utility in using the Nominal Group Technique.

Conclusion

The techniques of identifying critical issues are applicable to a variety of speech performance courses and to students with variant interests. Whether in the beginning public speaking course, or in the required communication course with many different majors, developing the ability to identify critical issues, and to discuss them in an educated fashion, should be an important goal of the speech education process. Isocrates suggested this kind of speech training, which makes the student-participant a better educated speaker and listener.

Our experience in using the critical issues approach in our speaking performance courses is that students become more competent in preparing a speech with strong content components while attaining similar, if not improved, delivery skills. Students become active participants in the course during the early stages of a term and become better educated audience members during speaking assignments. Students enjoy this approach in a two-fold manner: because they learn something about contemporary society, and as a speaker because they rise to the challenge of being an educated orator who begins to see the relationship between speaking skills and society at large.

NOTES

1. Russell H. Wagner, "The Rhetorical Theory of Isocrates," Quarterly Journal of Speech Education, November, 1922, 323-33.

2. Markus T. Cicero, Brutus VIII De Oratore II, XXII.

3. Wagner, p. 324.

4. George Norlen, trans., Isocrates, 1928, The Loeb Classical Library II, p. 213.

5. Ibid., pp. 337-9.

6. Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird, Speech Criticism (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1948).

7. Ibid., p. 467.

8. Ibid., p. 469.

9. Andre L. Delbecq, Andrew H. Van de Ven, and David Gustafson, Group Techniques for Program Planning (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1975), p. 174.

10. Ibid., pp. 66-9.

11. We have found that information is so abundant on these broad critical issue topics that considerable new information is brought to light with each succeeding speech. Focusing on a single topic permits concentrated research throughout the course and content in the speeches is vastly improved.

12. A sample listing of these speech topics includes: marriage, nonverbal communication, eating disorders, heart worm and its prevention, leukemia, independency, contemporary

Christian rock music, lupus disease, the common cold, weight control, cults, hunger, the economy, AIDS, alcoholism, nuclear defense, cost of education, medical costs, photography, quality of American cars, solar energy, abortion, ventriloquism, E.S.P., Ski touring, 20th century artists, weight lifting, using silly putty in stroke rehabilitation, effects of music, prayer in schools, Columbus, Ohio, treatment of the elderly, physical examinations, foreign cars, marketing soap operas, home computing, teddy bears, importance of speech communication, Arabian horses, shooting free throws, McDonalds Corporation, drinking and driving, softball, wearing seat belts, the ferret, freshman syndrome, drugs, the right to carry arms, smoking, interracial marriages, suntan, Red Cross, boxing, emergency medical treatment, investments, cosmetic surgery, women body builders.

13. Speech 554, "Speech Skills in the Classroom," is a freshman-level course required of all students interested in entering the School of Education, whether pursuing a degree in secondary, elementary, or special education.

14. Speech 652, "Business and Professional Speaking," is a sophomore-level course required of all students in the business school, and other students in Engineering and the technical programs.

15. Lawrence W. Hugenberg, Alfred W. Owens, II, and David J. Robinson, Structures for Business & Professional Speech,

Second Edition, (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1985). See the two organizational scenarios, "Modern Office Systems" and "Summers Department Store," for the organizational information provided students.

16. Students in the hybrid communication course selected the following topics at the beginning of the NGT during the first week of the course: music, experiences, sports, diseases, drugs, social problems, and the military. Students in Section B offered the following topics at the beginning of the NGT during the first week of the course: violence, foreign policy, conservation, music, sports, sex, drugs, health, and entertainment.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

Isocrates' theory of rhetoric as we have come to know it is clearly stated in Chapter 2 of Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird's Speech Criticism (New York, Ronald Press, 1948). These authors have themselves heavily relied on R.C. Jebb, The Attic Orators, Loeb Library (London, 1893) for information about Isocrates and his school of rhetoric.

The definitive book on nominal group technique is written by the creators of NGT, Andre L. Delbecq, Andrew Van de Ven, with David H. Gustafson, Group Technique for Program Planning (Glenview, Illinois: Foresman, and Company, 1975).

ARTICLES

The best interpretation of the Isocrates' approach we found was in Russell H. Wagner's, "The Rhetorical Theory of Isocrates," Quarterly Journal of Speech Education, Vol. 8 (1922), 323-37. Information about NGT may be found by reading A.L. Delbecq and A.H. Van de Ven, "A Group Process Model for Problem Identification and Program Planning," Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences, 7, 4 (July-August, 1971). Also read A.H. Van de Ven and A.L. Delbecq's article, "Nominal Versus Interacting Group Processes for Committee Decision-Making Effectiveness," Academy of Management Journal, 14, 2 (June, 1971), 203-12; in order to clearly understand how

nominal groups compare to interacting groups with regard to decision making. Finally, Pfeifer and Jones, Structured Group Exercises provide very helpful instructions for facilitating the Nominal Group Technique (NGT).